

BREAD OF HEAVEN

We take up from where we left off last Sunday, in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel, and almost instantly we are embroiled in perhaps the most beautiful or the most offensive passage in the New Testament, depending on how you hear it. It is Communion Sunday, and no Scripture reading could be more appropriate. We have all heard it many times, and most often it is read and lightly alluded to, or this or that phrase is drawn out of it and looked at. Many times it is simply offered, like poetry or any great work of art, and those who can, take from it what they will.

Yet the imagery is troublesome. Eating the flesh and drinking the blood of another human is not an appealing thought for us. Taking this passage literally, misses it completely – though most of Christendom still insists on doing that. Why are they not also out casting nets over people's heads, as if that would help them to faith? *"I will make you fishers of men."* On the other hand, what this passage is saying on psychological and spiritual levels is still quite offensive enough to stop most of us, at least at first. Clearly it was offensive when John wrote it, and probably worse when Jesus said it. But there is that other possibility as well, the one that often lures us into truth beyond our depth: the possibility that we may come to the meal, to our Lord, and to our God in ways more open and more complete than we have come before.

You and I know instinctively, though we often try to forget, that the Christian pilgrimage is more an inner battle than an outer transformation. The outer transformation just sort of tags along, like a puppy dog after its master. We desperately want to know God and to be right with God – we want our lives to be useful, and our hearts loving. At the same time, there is an inner resistance, a wanting to stay separate, a fierce desire to stay in charge of our own lives – of how we think and feel, and what we do. Sometimes we pray as much to ward God off as to invite God closer. Sometimes we pray more to give orders than to take them. Always there is a piece of us somewhere within that is poised to argue with God, or to flee from him. The image of God reaching out to us is ever the image of a kind hand stretched, if you will, toward a wild animal. We get enormously nervous. We know there is food. We long for the caress. There is promise of a safety, a cherishing, a purpose beyond all our wildest dreams. So we try to stay – we try to let the hand come close.

But the fear is great. We are not sure we want to be tamed. There will be obligations, and we don't even know what they will all be. Certainly there will be a loss of freedom. That is, freedom from some things is always slavery to others. Freedom from loneliness is always slavery to relationship, just as freedom from relationship is slavery to loneliness.

In any case, we dance and dart about at the approach of the Savior's hand like wild animals – eager, curious, frightened, alarmed, fascinated. We do not know precisely what will happen. When the hand reaches us, will we scratch and bite? Will we dash back into the thicket from which we came? Will we allow the caress? Will we let ourselves be enticed and fed into a whole different manner of life? If we are to sleep inside, out of the wet and cold and wild, does that not also mean that there is a door that will shut behind us, at least eventually?

The truth is, it takes many, many days for a wild animal to decide whether or not to accept a human's invitation to friendship and a different way of life. It takes one whole lifetime for a human being to decide whether or not to accept God's invitation to friendship and a different WAY of LIFE. So we stay skitterish through most of our days. And almost every day, we have to decide all over again – as the hand of God reaches out to us – whether to scratch and bite, whether to bolt, or whether to accept the food and nestle into the caress.

I remind you that we are in John's Gospel. Happily, more and more of you know what that means. We are not talking with Paul about the communion meal fifteen years after its inception. We are not learning from Matthew, Mark, or Luke what the traditions have become after thirty years of practice and experience. We are hearing from John, sixty years later. That is comparable to me talking about events that took place when I was a young boy. Be careful with such information. Some of you have a tendency to discount for distance. But what about perspective? Which would you trust more: a history of the Second World War written by an eyewitness in 1948, or a history of the Second World War written by a historian in 1998? That is a truly dumb question, is it not? Both are invaluable. The eyewitness will give a more graphic picture of what it was like actually being in the middle of one very tiny piece of it. But the historian has pored over the records and gathered information from every source he can find. Will that not yield a greater grasp of all the forces at play and what was really going on in the larger picture? If you care about the subject, you do not just want one or the other. Both are invaluable.

It is wonderful that our Scriptures give us a fifteen-year, a thirty-year, and a sixty-year perspective on what was going on. By the time John writes, the church had been celebrating the Lord's Supper for nearly sixty years. They had thought about it a lot. They had experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit with them through a lot of turmoil, travail, argument, sorrow, and joy. Some strange and powerful glue was holding them together despite all the persecution and hardship. Something really solid had formed in the world, and it was now in conflict with the Roman Empire for its very survival. Mark most often talks about how Jesus went here, went there, did this, said that – sometimes commenting on what impact it had on the individuals present. John's Gospel sees all the events in terms of a cosmic drama between God's forces of light and the forces of darkness. Mark's geography is within a hundred-mile radius of the Sea of Galilee. John's geography is the whole universe, through all time. "*In the beginning was the Word ...*" and Jesus had come down from Heaven to be bread for the whole world.

So it is foolish to ask which one is valuable, which one I should trust, which one I should believe. It is equally foolish to read them in a monotone, as if they have come from the same place, say the same thing, and hold the same perspective, and that it is all cut-and-dried and obvious.

One of the things that changed a lot after Paul died – and it continued to change after Mark wrote – was the growing animosity between the Roman Empire and Christianity. At the time John writes, Roman officials were putting Christians to death as enemies of the state. No such circumstance existed for Paul, Matthew, Mark, or Luke. For Paul and the synoptic writers, there was plenty of Jewish trouble, but not much Roman trouble. By John's time, this had changed dramatically. Judaism itself had been decimated by Rome, and Christians were officially enemies of the state. Like it or not, if you are living through it, that *changes* how you feel about what is going on – and it changes how you think about what Jesus was up to and why He came.

Among the several *official* reasons for considering Christians enemies of the state: they were charged with being immoral (they participated in secret love feasts); they were charged with breaking up families (conversion sometimes does that); they were charged with being irreligious (ironic, but it was because they wouldn't worship the official state gods, including the emperor); they were charged with giving allegiance to a King

they called Jesus, rather than to Caesar (treason); and they were charged with practicing cannibalism.

Unlike what some of us have been taught, it doesn't matter *what* you do – it matters what people *think* you do. That is: at least officially, in the outer circumstances and in the outer realms, it matters what people think you do, who they think you are, and what they think you are like. In terms of truth and God and the Spirit, however, you were right in the first place: What really matters is what you do, what you are really like, and who you truly are – and what people think cannot ultimately change that. It is one of the reasons for our deep gratitude for Christ's Kingdom. Nevertheless, in the late first century A.D., many Romans thought the Christian *agape* feasts were sexual orgies, and that the menu included eating human flesh and drinking human blood. The rumor persisted for generations.

John's Gospel is written in this context and atmosphere. At first there had been attempts to straighten out the confusion, but it was hard to explain to the uninitiated, and even harder to find people who wanted to understand, especially people with enough authority to make any difference. As many of us know, it is impossible to defend against slander. If you keep silent, you look guilty. If you speak, it sounds hollow. "I'm innocent, honest!" It is hard enough to gather compelling evidence that something *did* happen; it is far more difficult to gather compelling evidence that something *did not* happen. For this very reason, the Ten Commandments forbid "bearing false witness" – telling lies about other people. For this reason, we are supposed to be innocent until *proven* guilty. But that is not always the case, even in the courts, never mind outside the courts ... or in our own courtyard.

Anyway, the ones who knew that the Christians were not guilty of sex orgies or cannibalism were the Christians. For the most part, those who checked it out became Christians themselves. As soon as that happened, no outsider would believe *them* either. "You are guilty. Any contradiction from you or your friends is automatically inadmissible. And anybody who speaks on your behalf is your friend." That about wraps it up. So it would be over two hundred years before Rome changed its official position. Already by the time John writes, Christians weren't trying to convince Rome of *anything*. Rome was an evil empire, ruled by Satan, the Father of Lies. Rome was the enemy of truth and the enemy of God. In their gentle, loving ways and language – as you all think I

should emulate – the Christians by this time were referring to Rome as “*The great whore ... the mother of whores and of every obscenity on earth.*” (Revelation 17:1,5) And who do you insist wrote this? Ah yes: John, the beloved disciple. That’s not who I think wrote it, but never mind.

Anyway, John is not talking to the Romans, but to his fellow Christians. Notice that instead of running from or denying the slander, John glories in the communion misunderstanding. He makes the cannibalism theme as blatant as he possibly can. And every Christian of that time who read John’s Gospel would smile and nod. Yes! It was a great spiritual truth, and a thing all Christians held in common. Somehow it was made all the more delicious that the enemy was so annoyed and offended by it – and so completely wrong and in the dark about it. Today we have to wonder: Are we still in the dark about it?

You know what people can be like when they are caught, the situation is hopeless, and they have nothing to lose. Can you imagine a Roman soldier asking one of his prisoners, “Hey, do you people really eat human flesh?” And the reply, “Oh man, you have no idea how good it tastes! One good bite and you’ll never care if you have another taste of normal food again.” And the other prisoners smiling, nodding in agreement, and chiming in, “That’s the truth, man.” And on one level, they would be absolutely and totally serious. But what would that soldier go away thinking?

So John glories in this secret code shared among Christians – a code never intended to be secret, yet now was so misunderstood that it might as well be the cleverest deception ever invented. John makes the teaching as blatant as he possibly can. But he is also extremely serious, and as deeply thoughtful as any human in the world of his time. So he plays off Moses, and manna. And indeed he does mean to proclaim, as clearly as he knows how, that Jesus is the Bread of God which comes down from Heaven to give life to the whole world – to feed us – to give us nurture that will never cease and never run out. And the crazy thing is: this is still one of the best-kept secrets in the world, though nobody means to keep it a secret. Hitler said that if you tell a big enough lie often enough and loud enough, most people will come to believe it. Well, if you tell a deep and profound truth often enough and loud enough, more and more people will disbelieve it.

“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’” John really means it. This was not theory – it was experience. This was not creed – it was what was happening. Thousands of Christians in John’s day had heard or read this Gospel, and it had touched and reached their personal experience. This was TRUE. It was their new reality. They knew full well, John along with them, that at any slight turn of events, they themselves might be arrested, beaten, starved, killed. Yet they also knew that never again would they be hungry or thirsty – not on the inner soul-level like they had been before ... not the empty, alone, pointless, hopeless reality they had once known. Indeed, they had been given LIFE by *this* “Bread from Heaven,” and that kind of Life could not be taken from them. The world was strong, but not that strong.

“The bread which I shall give is my own flesh, given for the life of the world.” John is talking about the Cross, of course – the ultimate moment – the ultimate revealing of how much value God in Christ Jesus places upon us. It’s not the only place or the only way – not by a long shot – but it’s the ultimate place and way in which we graphically encounter the love of God for the very people we thought God didn’t really give a damn about: us. In the months and years that followed that Cross event, bands of Christians connected the Last Supper and the Cross more and more. Then more and more they connected the meal they ate together in remembrance of Him with the Cross and the Last Supper. More and more it came to epitomize and summarize the whole affair: what God was about; why Jesus had come; why they were going through their own troubles and challenges; where it was all leading. The real truth is, you have to eat it to understand. The real truth of Christianity is not something we can think through or test out until it’s all safe and sterilized. We have to eat it and drink it: take it into ourselves totally and fully; chew and swallow and digest; let it become what and who we are, infiltrating every fiber of our being. Starting with swallowing this business of how much God loves you: “You are my beloved son.” “You are my beloved daughter.” That must descend upon us. It is indistinguishable from the coming of the Holy Spirit. We must eat it – swallow it, digest it, believe it – or it cannot do its work within us. *“Whoever eats it will never die.”* This Cross. This love. You see, for most of the forming church, through all the early years, this Cross was seen as an expression of our worth to God, not a statement about our depravity. Nevertheless, what is our natural reaction whenever we are about to eat unknown food? We are afraid. Will it hurt me? What if it’s poison? It is

scary to take something into yourself if you are not sure what it will do to you. And this communion meal really *is* poison. It will kill many dark things within you.

“In very truth I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you can have no life in you.” At least none of the New LIFE Christ offers. We have to eat – ingest – this Cross, this proof of love, or we cannot even get into the game. It is all theoretical ... until after the meal. We cannot trust, or turn will and life over, or go on mission, or hear the whisper of the Spirit ... until after this meal. It is impossible before that. We can think about it, but we cannot do it. Only if we have eaten it – taken it deeply into ourselves – can we dare to trust the hand that reaches out to us – trust it enough to let it begin to feed us more ... and to guide us, discipline us, help us, protect us, and all the rest.

Now, I am not a Catholic. It's fine with me, this outer ritual we use to symbolize an inner truth, but I do not care about and am not speaking about grape juice or white flour. Nor am I trying to tell you that you have to participate in an outer human ritual or God will abandon you. We are talking about eating and drinking – taking in – Christ, the Revealer of God's love and power and purposes. And having said all that, or tried to in the best words I can call forth, I hasten to add that I have said nothing at all in comparison to the reality and truth of it. Do you know the deep, gnawing hunger of the soul – the loneliness of the inner being – before God draws close and comes real? We cannot just throw words at it. We have to eat it – take it into ourselves – or it can never truly nourish us. That is why this particular imagery has lasted all these centuries. All the robes and incense and trappings and incantations, important as they can be for some people, are just what we have decorated it with – what we have honored it with. But that is the periphery. It is not the core – it is not the meaning itself.

Of course, Christians would rather argue than eat. We can argue about almost anything, and the more central a thing is to our faith, the hotter the arguments. So we have split time and time again over the sacraments. Why would any denomination be called “Baptists”? Well, because they are the only ones who do baptism right, of course. Arguments over communion nearly destroyed the Protestant Reformation. Most of you know that Catholics insist on transubstantiation, where

the bread and wine actually turn into the body and blood of Christ – physically. It is a great miracle at every Mass. That’s how they keep the sacrament sacred. To an old Quaker boy, that seems like silly superstition – and takes the emphasis off the Spirit and puts it on the physical, which obscures the sacred. But I like what it does for a lot of devout Catholics. On the other end of the spectrum, many Protestants say that the sacrament is merely symbolic – and not long afterward, they lose all reverence, respect, and connection. They get a little juice and a bit of bread, and that’s it. They do not take any Christ Jesus into them. In comparison to that, silly superstition is a tremendous improvement.

The great Reformers held neither view. Luther and Calvin were highly annoyed at how the Catholic church had turned the communion meal (the Eucharist) into a political game that they could control and use, and neither believed any pope or bishop had the right or authority to withhold the wine from believers. They thought transubstantiation was not only foolish, but put the emphasis in exactly the wrong place. It is not a physical miracle but a spiritual presence and power that redeems us. Calvin, so much better than his reputation, in trying to reply to the question “How is Christ present in the Lord’s Supper?” said he had no doubt that Christ was present, but “if anyone asks me *how*, I will not be ashamed to admit that the mystery is too sublime for my intelligence to grasp or my words to declare; to speak it more plainly, I experience rather than understand it.” That was back in 1543. Luther and Calvin had it right. We have to eat it, not just think about it. For some things, if we try to define and explain them, it only shows how profoundly we misunderstand. It is a great day when any human says to God: “You are mystery too grand and great for me to comprehend – not because I’m lazy, but because You are too great. I offer my life and my allegiance in reverence and awe – not because I have it all figured out, but because I have come to trust You.”

Don Niederfrank tells of being at a youth retreat some years ago at which the closing worship was led by a clown/mime. It was near Christmas time and this was a communion service, and the clown/mime put a big gift box on the altar and opened it up, taking out a large loaf of bread. He wrapped the loaf in a white cloth, like a baby, and cuddled it, then carried it out to the congregation and gave it to someone to hold. He looked back at the altar and Cross and slowly walked back to them. He stood in front of the altar for a while, and then went back to the loaf of bread that was also a baby, and took it from that person.

Looking back over his shoulder at the altar and Cross, he carried the bundle farther into the congregation and gave it to another person to hold. Then he walked very slowly back to the altar, and stood for a long time staring at the Cross. Then he went back into the congregation, got the bread/baby/bundle, and brought it back to the altar. He unwrapped it, laid the loaf on the altar, covered it with the cloth, uncovered it, then broke it and served communion.

Afterward Don said to someone, “I didn’t understand what he was doing with the communion loaf. Why did he keep giving it to different people in the congregation?” The person replied, “He was trying to give the baby to the people in some other way. He didn’t want to have to break the baby.”

Don said it was one of those flashing, imploding moments for him, and three things flooded his being:

- 1.) The clown (God) did not want the baby to be broken.
- 2.) The people did not know how to accept or receive the baby – they did not know what to do with Him.
- 3.) Suddenly the Cross and the breaking were revealed as the only way to make the baby available to all of us – on the inside – in a way that could truly transform us. A meal was the only symbol strong enough to carry the meaning.

Then, he said, he broke down and started weeping.

It is different whether you just think about it, or truly eat it.